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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000773

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: ANYTHING BUT CONCILIATORY: SARG
FOCUSED ON IRAQ, REVOKING AMSCHOOL STAFF VISAS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 756
[1](#)B. LONDON 2755
[1](#)C. IIR 6 891 005 09
[1](#)D. 07 DAMASCUS 1080
[1](#)E. DAMASCUS 107
[1](#)F. DAMASCUS 677

Classified By: Classified by CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d
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Corrected classification (Damascus 772).

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Several Embassy sources suggest Iran and Hizballah are pressuring the SARG not only to lobby PM Maliki's government to alter the U.S.-Iraqi bilateral security framework and SOFA, but also to participate in joint attacks against U.S. military targets in Iraq and elsewhere. As reported Ref C, Iran is also reported to be pushing Russian Embassy reps here to provide Syria with advanced air defense systems to protect its eastern border. Up to now, President Asad appears reluctant to involve Syria in a military strike against the U.S., but the SARG announced November 2 it moving security troops from the Iraqi-Syrian border. FM Muallim, who reportedly was working to convince President Asad that Syria risks putting Syrian-U.S. relations in the "deep freeze" well into the future, is now saying publicly that Syria may resort to more "painful" measures. In a message passed through a visiting American academic, Muallem assured us the SARG did not want to escalate the situation and would increase Embassy security. Many Syrians tell us the SARG restrictions on Embassy operations may in fact be reversible if the USG is willing to explain its alleged 10/26 actions in a way that allows both sides to save face and defuse further confrontation. On November 3 (today), however, the Ministry of Education and Immigration authorities have canceled the visas of American School teachers and given them until midnight November 4 to be out of the country. End Summary

THE SOFA IS THE ISSUE

[1](#)2. (S) As initially suggested ref A, a growing number of Embassy sources suggest that Syria is focused on Iraq in responding to the alleged 10/26 U.S. attack at Abu Kamal. Moreover, we are hearing Iran and Hizballah are urging Syria to collude in attacks against U.S. military targets in Iraq and elsewhere, in addition to lobbying Iraq to insist on

security framework and SOFA language explicitly forbidding U.S. attacks on foreign targets from Iraqi soil. Mohammad Musli (strictly protect), a Palestinian-American academic who enjoys access to Syrian officials, commented that "there isn't much the Syrians can do on their own in this regard, but they can strengthen Iranian efforts to lobby the GOI." Musli warned Iran and Hizballah were goading Syrian counterparts by arguing "the Americans are not hitting us because they know we will respond."

13. (S) Former Minister of Telecommunications Amre Salem (strictly protect) confirmed this assessment, saying he had heard the President is wary of Iranian designs that might lead Syria into war. "Asad had to demonstrate he was capable of responding," but the Syrian President remained doubtful of those who argue America's influence is in irreversible decline. Asad, added Salem, would be likely to respond positively to a USG message that conveyed the intended purpose and the actual results of the U.S. military raid, expressed condolences for any innocent fatalities and injuries, and mentioned an interest in discussing the incident with Syrian authorities. Asad, said Salem, understood that the U.S. was in a dominant position, but it was not necessary to stress this point because it would only embarrass him.

DESPITE MUALLIM'S EFFORTS, DCS TEACHERS ORDERED TO LEAVE

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14. (S) Returning to Syria after his trip to London (Ref B), FM Muallim reportedly has been working to convince Asad to contain U.S.-Syrian tensions and find a face-saving exit. According to Musli, SARG officials are at a loss to explain why the U.S. launched the alleged 10/26 raid after the Secretary's and NEA A/S Welch's recent meetings with FM Muallim in New York. Reflecting a limited understanding of the U.S. political scene, many regime insiders have concluded the purpose of the alleged raid was to influence the U.S. Presidential elections, Musli said. (Note: Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustafa made these arguments in a recent "Newsweek" interview.) A few Syrians have told Musli they believe the current administration is using its remaining days in office to sabotage the possibility of better U.S.-Syrian relations in the future.

15. (S) According to Musli, Muallim has expressed a strong desire to contain the current situation and prevent it from escalating. Above all, Muallim wants to avoid provoking a U.S. decision to expel Ambassador Mustafa because "it will take months before the SARG could replace him." Muallim, says Musli, is mindful that closing the American School represents a punishment that will affect the broader diplomatic and international community in Damascus, and he is reportedly trying to reverse the decision. A number of diplomatic missions and international organizations, led by Canada, requested MFA appointments to protest the SARG's closure of the school. They will meet with D/FM Faisal Miqdad at 1200 local November 3. (Note: We received word November 3 (today) that the Ministry of Education has issued an order for DCS teachers to leave Syria by midnight November 14. The school has notified parents that it will be closing its doors today.)

16. (S) Former Minister Salem, who has a daughter in DCS, told us the SARG response was not well conceived and probably reflected the negative influence of the Ministry of Education. He predicted (correctly) the Ministry of Education would attempt to move forward quickly to head off any efforts by others to reverse the decision. Many Syrians, he said, were weighing in privately, and there was some hope that the President could be persuaded to reverse his position. The President and a minority of his inner circle

"surely understood what target the U.S. was after," but had no choice but to respond publicly. According to Salem, the regime may have been caught flatfooted by Syrian press reports that broke the story of the U.S. raid. Once the incident became public and it was clear there were eyewitnesses, "the regime lost its ability to deny the incident." At the same time, Salem was hearing Asad wanted to prevent further escalation and avoid any moves that would put bilateral relations in the "deep freeze" for some time to come. But it was clear that SARG insiders with an axe to grind against the school and cultural center "had the President's ear at the moment." Again, suggested Salem, a face-saving message from the U.S. would help SARG insiders arguing for a more moderate approach.

MOVEMENT AT THE SYRIAN-IRAQI BORDER

¶7. (S) Meanwhile, regional and Syrian media reported a SARG decision to withdraw border security troops from the east and re-deploy them to Syria's border with Lebanon. According to various report from Embassy contacts, including defense attaches who participated in an October 31 SARG-organized trip to Abu Kamal, some 200 Syrian border guards had been moved. During the Abu Kamal briefing (Ref C), Syrian officials reportedly told the attaches that they understood repositioning border forces would lead to terrorist attacks in Iraq and argued such attacks would be "justified" in light of the alleged 10/26 U.S. attack. The Iranian Embassy, which received a separate SARG briefing along with Russian and Chinese reps, reportedly is pushing Russian dips here to provide enhanced air defense systems to protect Syria's border with Iraq. According to Salem, the U.S. might be able to score public diplomacy points on this issue by suggesting a pull back of Syrian border guards would leave the U.S. no choice but to consider future cross-border operations in the absence of any expressed will to cooperate.

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¶8. (S) Comment: Our assessment of SARG decisionmaking begins and ends with the assumption that regime survival and prestige matter most to President Asad. An American attack on Syrian soil would represent the latest in a long series of foreign incursions against Syrian sovereignty and national dignity. These include the September 2007 Israeli bombing of al Kibar, the February 2007 assassination in Damascus of Imad Mugniyah, and the September 28 bombing against a Syrian Military Intelligence facility (Refs D-F). In the current situation, the SARG's responses of anti-U.S. bromides and orders to close the American School and Cultural Center appear meant to reaffirm evidence of Bashar's backbone while stopping short of retaliating in a way that could pose real retaliatory threats to Damascus and end the prospects for better relations with the U.S. and the West in the future. These responses appear aimed at annoying, rather than threatening. This is a distinction lost on the 450-plus parents of children attending the American School and the some 2,000 American Language Center students (mostly Syrian) who find themselves in the role of innocent victims.

¶9. (S) If anything, the SARG's position is hardening. Even so-called regime moderates such as Muallim are now warning the SARG may resort to more "painful" responses if the U.S. does not explain its actions. Iran's behind-the-scenes actions appear intended to push Syria toward confrontation with the U.S. and the West. Maintaining Washington silence will no doubt continue to keep the SARG guessing, frustrate friendly governments who would otherwise be willing to make our case, and befuddle ordinary Syrians who still are trying to process the SARG's unchallenged allegations of a U.S. attack on Syrian soil. Within the SARG, however, regime hacks are citing U.S. silence as a sign of weakness and are pushing Bashar to take bolder, more confrontational steps. Any U.S. explanation that we could share with Syrian and

other contacts should clearly highlight the potential costs to future U.S.-Syrian relations if Syria continues its involvement with FF facilitators and takes steps to reduce border security that result in increased attacks against Coalition forces.

CONNELLY